DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 819 PS 001 677

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Teaching Mothers to Teach: A Home Counseling Program for Low-Income Parents.

Michigan Univ., Ann Arbor. School of Social Work.
Spons Agency-Washington State Univ., Pullman. Agricultural Education.; Ypsilanti Public Schools, Mich.
Pub Date Nov 68
Note-17p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.95
Descriptors-Cognitive Development, *Concept Teaching, *Culturally Disadvantaged, *Home Programs, Home Visits, *Kindergarten Children, Parent Counseling, *Parent Education, Program Evaluation, Teaching Skills
Identifiers-Cognitive Home Environment Scale, Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test

Twenty-four children attended a special half-day class when not attending regular kindergarten, and 12 of their mothers participated in a home counseling program. Children whose mothers were counseled achieved significantly higher on the Metropolitan Reading Test, and their mothers showed a significantly greater gain on the Cognitive Home Environment Scale. In biweekly home visits, parents were shown how to teach specific cognitive concepts to support school curriculum, to evaluate children's progress, and to motivate the children to become involved in the home education program. Approaches and techniques employed to abet parents' teaching skills are delineated in the report, and an evaluation of the program with recommendations for modifications are included. (DO)

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TEACHING MOTHERS TO TEACH:

A HOME COUNSELING PROGRAM

FOR LOW-INCOME PARENTS *

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November 1968

* This research was supported by a grant from the State of Michigan under Section IV of the Michigan State Aid Act and by the Ypsilanti Public Schools, Ypsilanti, Michigan. The authors wish to express their deep appreciation to the entire staff of the Supplementary Kindergarten Intervention Program whose enthusiastic cooperation was unfailing. A special word of thanks is also due the participating parents whose ideas played a major role in the evaluation of the home counseling program.

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TEACHING MOTHERS TO TEACH: A HOME COUNSELING PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME PARENTS

Abstract

A methodology used by a counselor in working with parents of disadvantaged kindergarten children is described. In bi-weekly visits to the home of each student, parents were shown how to teach their children specific cognitive concepts to support the school curriculum. Parents were also taught how to evaluate the progress that their children were making, and how to motivate the youngsters to become involved in the home education program. Illustrations are offered of the approaches and techniques employed to enhance the parents' teaching skills. An evaluation of the program and recommendations for possible modifications are discussed.

TEACHING MOTHERS TO TEACH: A HOME COUNSELING PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME PARENTS

Introduction

Increasing emphasis has been placed on the parent role in fostering cognitive development of the young disadvantaged child (Radin and Weikart, 1967; Gray and Klaus, 1965; Karnes, et. al., 1968) and on the importance of follow-through of compensatory preschool programs. In an effort to explore both avenues the Ypsilanti Public Schools conducted a Supplementary Kindergarten Intervention Program (referred to as SKIP)[1] during the 1967-1968 school year for youngsters from low-income families who had participated in preschool programs and appeared to have high ability. The goal was to determine whether the gains attained the previous year could be maintained through additional classroom time spent teaching Piaget-based concepts (Kamii and Radin, 1967) with parental support of the curriculum. The program involved enrolling 24 children in a special class in the half-day when they were not attending regular kindergarten. In addition, the mothers of one-half of the 24 youngsters participated in a home counseling program focused on helping parents internalize the role of mother and teacher. An evaluation of the project revealed that the twelve youngsters in the parent counseling group attained a significantly higher score on a standard achievement test (the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test) than the two matched control groups, one consisting of youngsters in

the Supplementary Kindergarten Class but not involved in a home counseling program, and one consisting of youngsters involved in neither special class nor home counseling. In addition, the mothers involved in the counseling program showed a significantly greater gain than the mothers of the remaining participants in the program on an instrument designed to measure the cognitive stimulation taking place in the home (The Cognitive Home Environment Scale).[2]

In view of the promise shown by the approach taken in the home counseling project, and its ease of replication, the following paper was prepared describing the methodology used by the home counselor (or parent worker as she was called), the parents' response to the program, and recommendations for possible modifications.

Description of the Program

Overview

The parent worker, who had a background in both teaching and counseling, visited the mothers individually on a bi-weekly basis. In these sessions she discussed specific cognitive consepts being emphasized in the classroom and showed each parent ways of teaching the concepts to her child. Thus the parent was given instruction in both what to teach and how to teach it, both content and process. In addition, mother and counselor together evaluated the implementation of the previous session's teaching assignment and the progress shown by the child. The main objective was to help each mother see herself and her home as a resource for her child.

Establishing and Maintaining the Working Relationship

The importance of the mother's involvement was established during the

recruitment phase of the program. A commitment to entry into a working relationship with the parent worker was listed as a requirement for the child's participation in the SKIP Program although no mother who was approached refused to participate. The parent was asked which days of the week would be best for such a visit. During the initial visit by the home counselor a regularly scheduled time for the bi-weekly meetings was established and no further confirmations of regularly scheduled meetings were made. The parent worker simply arrived at the parent's home at the scheduled time. If the parent failed to be home at the scheduled time, the parent worker contacted the parent by phone and arranged for another appointment.

The mother was helped to see herself as an important resource for her child during the very first visit when the parent worker said, "You know a lot about your child that is very important for a teacher to know. You know about the kinds of things that affect his learning. For example, what is his memory like? What is his imagination like? Does he play alone well? How does he get along with others? Can he share things? Is he ab to understand how other people feel?" With each question, the parent's response was clarified, elaborated, and rewarded by the parent worker.

In addition, in the first meeting information about the child's attainment of specific cognitive concepts was discussed with the parent. This evaluation was based on a diagnostic test administered by the SKIP classroom teacher. Thus, the important norm of evaluating what the child knows was established. The norm was maintained through every visit by asking the mother approximately how much time she had spent teaching a cognitive concept and

and how well she thought the child had learned the concept.

Another phase of the first, and all subsequent meetings, was giving the mother a teaching assignment to work on before the next session. The assignment consisted of 2 or 3 specific cognitive concepts which were chosen from the information provided by the diagnostic test or the SKIP curriculum supervisor. All assignments were written down and left with the mother. At the same time, the parent worker offered many examples of the ways in which the concept could be taught, each time using materials readily available in the home, i.e.,dishes, beds, chairs, clocks, etc. While offering examples of ways to teach a specific concept, the parent worker tried to elicit examples from the mother. When it was appropriate, the parent worker role-played the teaching of the concept, at times taking the role of the teacher and at others the learner, changing roles with the mother.

Another important idea which was emphasized from the very beginning was that of engaging the father in the teaching role. The parent worker helped the mother to see that she could show her husband how to teach concepts, just as she had been shown by the parent worker. On a few occassions, the actual session with the home counselor was attended by a father and mother together, or by a father alone when his wife was unable to keep the appointment. When fathers participated in the sessions they often cited examples of the kinds of teaching they had tried. When the father was not present, mothers often reported examples of his teaching along with her own activities. For example one mother said, "While I was doing the dishes, his daddy pointed at the cup, bowl and glass and asked Jimmy how they were all the same and Jimmy told him the

tops were all round." Apparently, the father's involvement grew quite naturally out of the teaching-learning interactions he was observing.

Teaching Specific Concepts

After the first meeting the cognitive goals for each meeting were modified according to the following criteria: 1) an evaluation by the SKIP classroom teacher of the child's strong and weak areas in concept development, 2) parent's evaluation of the child's attainment of the assigned cognitive goals, 3) the parent worker's evaluation of the parent's current teaching ability, i.e., level of confidence and past reward schedule.

At the second meeting, the routine procedure for subsequent meetings was established. After taking a very few minutes to become physically comfortable in the room, the parent worker asked the mother to evaluate the teaching of the last cognitive goals in terms of the time spent teaching the concept and how well the child had learned the goal. The parent was also asked to give specific examples of the kinds of interaction she had with the child, of things she tried with the child to follow through with the cognitive concepts assigned. For example, with comparative concept, "soft" and "softer," the mother might say she spent a lot of time teaching it and that the child knew the concept very well. More information would then be solicited. The mother might say that she had asked the child what was softer---the cushion or the rug. When the child said the cushion, the mother had asked her about the pillow or the bed. The child had said the pillow was softer than the bed.

At this point the parent worker was especially careful to help the mother evaluate the examples she had used in her teaching with respect to

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their degree of difficulty. There was a tendency, on the part of the mothers to choose examples for teaching which were too hard for the child. The parent worker tried to help the mother recall what the child's reaction had been when the child could not answer the question. Did he get angry? Did he look sad? Did he look afraid? Did he say he wanted to go out and play? If he did, the parent worker asked the mother what she had said to the child when he couldn't answer the question. When appropriate, to make things a bit more pointed, the parent worker occasionally asked the mother, "How would you feel if you couldn't answer one of your husband's questions and he said the same thing to you?" The parent's reaction was usually one of instant empathy. Similarly, the importance of praise for correct or almost correct answers was stressed.

After proceeding through the evaluation of each of the last session's goals in the above manner, the parent worker went on to discuss the current goals, in each instance giving numerous examples of ways in which each concept might be taught.

If there was time left in the session after the main work of evaluation of past performance and discussion of the current assignment, it was usually spent talking about relevant parent-initiated topics. Some mothers spontaneously offered to show the parent worker their child's report card from regular kindergarten; another asked about how to stop nail-biting in an older child; others wanted to know how to get children to behave, how to explain about sex to children, etc. All of these concerns dealt with the crucial mother-teacher role and were pursued in the time that was left.

As a rule, the parent worker did not reinforce conversation which was irrelevant and within a few meetings the incidence of this type of discussion was negligible. In a few cases it was apparent that the parent needed information about services which were available to her, (i.e., public health nurse, planned parenthood, legal aid, etc.) and a referral was made. In general, the parent worker made it clear that her role was not that of confidant or therapist. Rather, her role was to help parents see how important they were in their child's education.

Illustration of the Teaching of Some Specific Concepts

Comparative ordering on a single scale. The parent worker began by saying: "Do you think James knows what soft and softer mean?" After the mother's response, which in most cases was negative, the parent worker went on to say, "It's very important for James to learn this basic idea about one of the ways we order things, i.e., in a series. After he learns soft and softer, maybe at the next meeting we'll add softest; but for now we'll first work on soft and softer."

"Dinnertime is a good time to teach soft and softer. You can ask James: 'Are your mashed potatoes soft?' If your child says, 'Yes,' you say, 'Yes, they're soft; mashed potatoes are soft.' Then ask him, 'is the butter soft---Yes, the butter is soft. Which is softer, the mashed potatoes or the butter?---Yes, the butter is softer.'

"The bedroom is a good place to teach soft and softer too. For example: Is the bed soft? Yes, the bed is soft. Is the pillow soft? Yes, the pillow is soft. Which is softer, the bed or the pillow? Feel them. Yes, the pillow is softer than the bed."

"You see you can teach this at dinner and in the bedroom. Can you think of a way to teach it here in the living room?"

At this time the mother usually felt comfortable in offering some examples of her own. At a propitious moment, the parent worker slipped into the child's role and gave correct and incorrect answers to give the mother practice at teaching the concept.

If-then relationships. The parent worker introduced the topic by saying, "If and then is an important concept to learn. The thing to remember when teaching this is that the examples you choose should be things that you actually do in front of the child, things that he can imitate and find out the answer for himself. For example, see this pencil; you could begin with: 'If I push this pencil, then it will roll.' And then do it. 'If I let go of this pencil, then it will fall.' And do it. 'If I drink all this milk, then the glass will be empty.' Drink it and say, 'See, the glass is empty.'

"What examples have you thought of? An example that would be too hard to use when the child is learning this concept would be something like this. 'If a seed is put in dirt and gets sunshine and water, then it will grow.' This one is too hard because the child can't actually see this happen. Can you think of some of the examples that are too hard?"

Classification. The parent worker began by saying, 'One of the main ways we organize our thinking is by putting things into groups. Nearly everything we can see can be grouped according to: color, shape, what it's used for, what it's made of, if it's part of a whole, its name or a label. We can

help Jimmy learn this two ways. The first way is to ask Jimmy to make up the group himself. You can do this by picking out one item. Without naming the item, point to it and ask, 'What in the room is the same as this?' For example, if you had pointed at a red lamp shade and Jimmy pointed at a red chair, then you would say, 'Why are they the same?' Jimmy will probably answer, 'Because they're all red.' In this instance, his way for grouping was color, rather than shape or use.

"The second way to learn grouping is to make up the group of objects and ask Jimmy, 'How are these three things the same?' Remember, don't name them; point to them instead. For example, point to the table, chair, and molding around the door and ask, 'How are these things the same? Yes, that's right, they're all made out of wood. Very good!' It is important for you to notice if he seems to favor any one way of grouping things when he makes up the group. For example, if he seems to favor grojping things according to color, then you could concentrate on other ways of grouping when you make up the group.

"I think you'll find that this is something he'll really like to do with you. It can get to be a lot of fun. Now let's try some more. I'll be Jimmy and you can ask me to make up the group. You ask, 'What's the same as this?' and point to it."

Data About Home Counseling Program

An analysis of the data collected during the meetings showed that between January and May, 1968 when the parent counseling program was in operation a total of 79 visits were made by the parent worker who was employed on a half-time basis. Eight mothers were visited 7 times each;

3 mothers were visited 6 times each; and 1 mother was visited 5 times. Each visit lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The visits were all held in the mother's home except for one occasion wherein the mother observed in the SKIP classroom. Three-quarters of the mothers were very responsible about keeping appointments. Two of the mothers seemed to have good intentions but sometimes did not follow through. One mother who had two jobs and twelve children was least reliable.

In a negligible percentage of the meetings there were other children or adults present. This finding may be related to the fact that the mean number of younger siblings of the participants was only 1.0 whereas the number of older siblings was 2.3. Thus most of the older children in the family were at school during the visits. Nevertheless it does appear that the parents were making an effort to make the environment of the home visit a meaningful one. For example, on the few occasions when there was a phone call, the mother got off the phone quickly saying that the teacher was here and that she would return the call later. This type of behavior and the increasingly positive feedback of the mothers concerning the mother-child interactions led to the impression that the mothers felt the parent worker visits were important to them.

Evaluation of the Home Counseling Program

The parent worker noted that as the weeks went on the mothers began to comment, "This is really interesting. I really like teaching her and she likes me to teach her. The other day my daughter said: 'I like you to teach me things, Mom!' "Such comments tended to increase with each visit except when there were some major disruptions in the routine that had been established, i.e., illness or having to take a trip.

During final conferences, the classroom teacher conducted a

brief evaluation of the parent visit program with each mother. Two-thirds of the mothers were interviewed and the following distribution of responses was recorded.

1. How helpful do you think the parent visit program has been for you? very helpful - 7; helpful - 0; a little helpful - 1; not at all helpful - 0.

2. Did the parent visits present any difficulties for you? frequently difficult - 0; sometimes difficult - 0; seldom difficult - 1; not difficult - 7.

3. Did you and your child enjoy the tasks assigned to you? yes - 8; no - 0.

4. Were the tasks generally: too hard - 0; too easy - 3; too time consuming - 1; just right - 4; other - 0.

5. In what ways were the parent visits helpful to you? "Helped him to get work he doesn't understand. I liked finding other things to do--it made me more aware of things to do with my other children too."

"My husband and I both really liked to be able to help _____--sometimes the things were too easy but it was good to see what you were doing and to help _____."

"Helpful to know what was going on in the school--didn't have to guess how he was doing in his work or how well--Gave me an idea of problems in school."

"Tells me what's going on in this school--how she progresses in school. Shije (parent worker) and--well we had a great time working together. Shije said it would have been great to have a tape recorder for some of our talks."

"We both enjoyed this very much. _____liked to be doing something with me alone--the other children had to stay away while we worked--it made me feel closer to school."

"It was better for me to work with ____because I was not just looking on and I felt more involved. Last year I remember one time in particular when his teacher was working with him one day. I knew he just didn't understand what she wanted him to do, but I was afraid to interfere, you know."
"We were doing something together and _____really liked it. It was different than regular school because I knew what was happening. I thought it was good."
"I could help her."

6. Would you suggest any changes for the Parent Visit Program next year? Yes - 1; No - 7.

Recommendations

If time had permitted the parent worker would have begun organizing small group meetings, inviting mothers who seemed compatible to share their views and experiences with one another. On the few occasions when mothers had the chance to exchange teaching experiences, as on visits to the SKIP classroom, it was apparent that there was much to be gained from their interaction. For example, in one of these brief exchanges one mother said, "I just gets down on the floor and works on the learnin' with Jimmy and just lets my housework wait, because you can't get all the housework done anyhow." The mother who heard this responded in surprise, "You get right down on the floor with him, do you? I ain't never done that." After further conversation, it became clear that although this was a new idea to her she was eager to experiment with it.

In light of the primary objective of the home counseling program of helping each mother internalize the role of mother-teacher, it is also recommended that each mother be helped to work with another parent. For a

highly skilled mother, it is recommended that she work with another mother who is not participating in the program. If necessary, these cooperative ventures could be initiated by the parent worker who could arrange a meeting between the pair. It is the authors' belief that everything possible should be done to give parents the opportunity to share their learnings with others. Thus two goals will be attained simultaneously; enhanced comprehension and dissemination. One parent will be helped to deepen her own understanding through the active articulating of her activities and the second parent will begin to see how crucial she is in the development of her child's cognitive abilities.

Further, in view of the shortage of professional personnel and the advantages to be gained in using indigenous workers, it is recommended that paraprofessionals be trained to function as home counselors under supervision. Some initial efforts at the preschool level have given indication of the fruitfulness of this approach.

To summarize, schools cannot do the entire job of educating children, particularly when cognitive stimulation has been sparse in the first few years of the youngster's life. Lower-class parents are a potent resource too long neglected by educators. The capacity and motivation are there but not the skill. It is hoped that the above account will stimulate educational institutions to explore techniques which will actualize this dormant power.

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Footnotes

[1]Funded under Section IV of the Michigan State Aid Act of 1967.

[2]A full report of the program and results appears in the Supplementary Kindergarten Intervention Program Final Report, Ypsilanti Public Schools, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1968.